Comment on Penelope Harvey

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I found Penelope’s reflections on the role of language in anthropological collaborations extremely interesting. Perhaps because recently I have been thinking about collaborations myself, albeit in different ways than the ones Penelope was engaged with. My own interest in collaborations emerges more from an artistic perspective, where collaborative art (similar to anthropology) is seen as one way forward to produce less hierarchies and greater equality. But then – this is also one of Penelope’s concerns, certainly in outlining some of the internal dynamics of the multi-national team (UK, US, and Peru) of which she was a part. In fact, I think, in her reflection concerns with the team’s structures and internal dynamics take precedence over the role of language – which does (sort of) play a minor role when it comes to collaboration.

The really interesting questions that emerge in Penelope’s paper revolve around issues of economic, social, and political power: Who, at the end of a collaborative project, has job security? Why was it the case that the Peruvian anthropologists wanted to see changes on the ground (after all, the collaborative project revolved around municipal and community understandings in relation to improving water qualities, and sanitation and waste systems), when non-Peruvian anthropologists seemed more or less content with documenting what was “just there.” What, in the end, is the purpose and effect of collaborations when funding ends, projects “are over,” and the manic frenzy of “getting together” subsides? As I am writing I – like Penelope – am aware that language does not necessarily figure in these considerations, although it would have been interesting to learn more about this, since language certainly comes with its own power issues.

In Penelope’s description issues of language emerge most interestingly in relations to one of ethnography’s most cherished methods: the taking of fieldnotes. Given that fieldnotes – the uneven, evocative, “spur of the moment,” carefully noticed, and often hard-won data of fieldwork – are at the heart of ethnographic practice, Penelope’s description of the tensions and challenges around them carries a particular charge. Given also that the fieldnotes she describes where produced by an English – speaker in Spanish (the anthropologist was fluent in Spanish), and thus seemingly reverted the power relation in which English is the alpha and omega of all academic communication, her point seems all the more interesting. In Penelope’s description, it is clearly that the case that these particular fieldnotes mattered a great deal, and I am not entirely sure what kind of fieldnotes others produced, where they “ended up,” and why – again – the Peruvian anthropologists ended up as “minor traditions.” Is this because in the end it is training (preferably in the English-speaking academy) and not language that matters. By mistake I initially ended up commenting on Christine Jourdan’s reflections, and I found a similar point there. It is potentially all very interesting, and somewhat disturbing.

I thought that Penelope’s set-up – the rhythm of movements, gestures, and touches between people – was exquisite, and I do think that it is in these “infrastructures” that she places her hopes of true collaboration. I, for one, would like to learn more about these movements, and the sense of – as Penelope says – that they form a language that can become a source of possibility and creativity.